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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights features, uses, and training issues related to AltaVista Forums, a World Wide Web-based conferencing tool. An overview of the features of AltaVista Forums is provided; highlights include asynchronous online discussions, chats, document attachments, URL posting, a calendar feature, and mail-to listings. Pricing and system requirements are noted. The integration of AltaVista Forums in postsecondary courses at the University of Indianapolis and Indiana University is then discussed, including a few techniques the authors have used or observed for integrating AltaVista Forums. Training strategies to support faculty and student use of AltaVista Forums are presented, and student and faculty reactions to AltaVista Forums are summarized. The paper concludes with a discussion of advantages and disadvantages of AltaVista Forums. (DLS)

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Using Web-Based Conferencing in Post-Secondary Instruction

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Institutions of Higher Education are currently caught up in the whirlwind of new electronic technologies, and wide-spread discussion is centered on the concept of the virtual university, the topic of university's role in providing distance education (Guernsey & Young, 1998). Regardless of the position one takes in these discussions, the fact is that electronic technologies are here to stay, and from now on they will impact the ways universities do business, the way faculty teach, and the way students learn.

One of the most popular and powerful electronic tools that has become available in the recent past is web-based conferencing, which takes advantage of the combination of file server storage capabilities and web browser capabilities to allow faculty to create discussion forums in which users can send and receive text messages in order to conduct groups discussions.

A number of commercial and freeware conferencing programs have been developed, each with it's own strengths, weaknesses and unique features. Among the most popular commercial conferencing programs are AltaVista Forums, TopClass, WebBoard, WebCT, WebCrossing and Caucus. The most popular freeware conferencing programs include Conferencing on the Web (also known as COW), Discus, COCO Board and BBMatic (Woolley, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight features, uses and training issues related to a particular web-based conferencing tool, AltaVista Forums. This paper will provide an overview of the features of AltaVista, identify a few techniques the authors have used or observed for integrating AltaVista into courses, briefly discuss training strategies for teaching faculty and students to use AltaVista, outline student and faculty reactions to AltaVista, and indicate a few advantages and disadvantages of the AltaVista conferencing system.

Overview of AltaVista Forums Web-Based Conferencing

Because AltaVista conferencing takes place via browser (as all web-based conferencing does), learners are able to access the conference via any client machine (Macintosh, Windows and Unix). To access an AltaVista conference, learners enter the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of the conference, which typically is housed on a university fileserver. Once learners have accessed the conference, they will either be asked to log-in in order to access the conference, or they can choose to access the conference anonymously. Upon entering the conference, the learner can actively participate in asynchronous on-line discussions.

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In addition to the conferencing feature, AltaVista Forums offers a number of other features, some of which include: chats, which enable learners to conduct synchronous discussions such that the learners are all on-line discussing a topic at the same time; document attachments, which allow learners to post papers that others can download to their own computers; URL posting, so that learners can share access to other on-line sources by simply clicking on the web address; a calendar feature allows learners to post their personal schedules which facilitates scheduling when working in teams; mail-to listings allows learners to send a private e-mail to any other learner in the conference; and a feature called "newspaper" allows posting of articles that are of interest to the entire conference (Digital, 1998).

The University of Indianapolis has purchased a license to use AltaVista Forums, and at the time of this writing, Indiana University was negotiating the purchase of a license after a successful one-year pilot test. Digital advertises AltaVista for $4,000 for an unlimited use license. However, Digital provides an 80 percent discount for educational institutions, therefore, it can be purchased for $800. The annual maintenance fee is $200 per month. AltaVista runs on Windows NT, Solaris and Unix servers.

Integration of AltaVista in Post-Secondary Education Courses

In courses at the University of Indianapolis and Indiana University, AltaVista has been used to conduct learning activities such as posting information, content discussions, case analysis, group projects, and simulations. Faculty have used the forums to facilitate any-time, any-where interaction between the instructor and learners, between learners and other learners, and between learners and specialists in the field.

While web-based conferencing may be used as a sole means of instruction, in the experience of the authors, it has been primarily used to augment instruction. Conferences have been used to enable students to work in groups to discuss real-life case studies. Closed discussion groups have been created within conferences, allowing student teams to privately collaborate, share resources and discuss their projects.

The conference facilitator has the capability to create closed conferences or to open the conference in order to allow for anonymous participation. In this case, other faculty members or content specialists can join the conference to have discussions with and answer questions posted by students.

Web-based conferencing has also been used to provide learners with materials that would otherwise require printing and duplication by the instruction. Conferencing has allowed easy access by learners to course related on-line information, such as web-based URLs. Web-based conferencing has also been used by faculty to post surveys to which learners have been able to respond anonymously. This capability has enabled faculty to conduct pre-tests and post-tests to assess learning.

Training Strategies to Support Faculty and Student Use of AltaVista Forums

At the University of Indianapolis, hands-on training sessions have been and continue to be conducted in order to provide faculty with orientations to AltaVista Forums. In addition, a self-paced training/reference manual was developed for faculty and learner use. The

manual teaches the user how to obtain an AltaVista Forums account, how to access the account, how to log-in, create a forum, post to a forum, read a post, reply to a post, delete messages, establish links to other webpages, and how to configure a forum to do special tasks such as notify members when a post has been made.

Administrators at the University of Indianapolis have found that the AltaVista Forums software is extremely easy to use, but that the more difficult component is organizing the conference in a manner that makes sense to the learner. Therefore, faculty at the University of Indianapolis are encouraged to lay out the conference on paper in a storyboard fashion prior to creating the conference online, in order to identify the easiest means for the learner to navigate through the conference. One important lesson that has been passed along from University administrators to faculty in training sessions is that conferences should be developed using as few layers (levels of folders/directories) as possible so that learners do not get lost while navigating through the conference.

Student and Faculty Reactions to AltaVista Forums

Student response to the use of AltaVista Forums has for the most part been positive. In a particular case at the University of Indianapolis, web-based conferencing was used in an International Marketing in which learners were required to meet on-line 40 percent of class time rather than spending the time in class. The learners spent the time conducting group work on marketing case studies and were given specific guidelines about how to conduct the case analysis. Their on-line analysis of the case study became their grade for the case study. Several of the learners were unfamiliar with computers prior to the use of web-based conferencing. Learner response was overwhelmingly positive. Some particular responses follow:

- The course makes me think, analyze and summarize data which I collect from the Internet.

- I wish they offered more of this type of learning. I work full time, go to school, and raise 2 children, so my time is very valuable. But I love school so I could come home, and work on the computer, but also learn more than just international business, but also computer skills, typing skills and research all in one, plus more.

- Distance learning is great! It gave me a chance to learn at my own speed and also to interact with foreign students.

The vast majority of the learners found the use of web-based conferencing to be an enjoyable and worthwhile component of the course. Several learners asked the instructor if she planned to use web-based conferencing in more of her classes.

Negative responses which have been received have been minimal, and have typically reflected problems accessing computers or problems using computer hardware and software, which are beyond of the AltaVista Forums program.

The instructor of this particular course reported that, in her estimation, students submitted much higher quality case study reports in terms of the content and thoroughness of their work. Faculty at Indiana University have reported that the integration of AltaVista into courses is beneficial because it provides a focal point for the course other than a classroom,

one that students can access 24 hours a day. Additionally, faculty have reported that they find it beneficial to have a shared "group memory" of course materials, as they are added over the semester, and that the use of the Forum encourages greater planning and structure for courses.

Advantages/Disadvantages of AltaVista Forums

Several advantages and disadvantages of using AltaVista Forums have been identified in the preceding section. Overall, the primary advantage is the fact that it facilitates any-time, any-where interaction between course participants. Also, since web-based conferencing is independent of time and location, it seems to foster student interaction; this may be because students are able to interact with the discussion when it is convenient to them, or because students have more time to reflect upon their response they may provide better quality answers than they do in the regular classroom. One point for certain is that quick-witted students are less likely to dominate the discussion, since shy or contemplative students now have an equal opportunity to participate and make valuable contributions.

Disadvantages have also been identified. Primarily, learners must have access to a computer and more importantly, the web—which may be a hefty requirement for some students. Additionally, AltaVista Forums will not work with Windows 3.1, therefore students must use Windows 95 or a Macintosh.

Some faculty have reported that they simply don't like the concept of the conference, and that they prefer to have messages be delivered to them along with all their other e-mail.

Overall, the biggest disadvantage to using Alta Vista Forum from a faculty perspective is the amount of time that must be devoted to reviewing and answering correspondence, which can be an overwhelming task. In larger classes, it may be virtually impossible to review all correspondence. Faculty who have integrated web-based conferencing into their classes have commented how surprised they were at the amount of time it took to keep up with the steady flow of correspondence. Similar to a traditional course offering, the correspondence picks up significantly as deadlines approach.

Web-based conferencing has already been a useful to many faculty who have been encouraged by university administrators to integrate more technology into their teaching. Most faculty who begin to use web-based conferencing in their classes continue to use it in future courses. They may start small and growth with their use of the product, but few, if any, discontinue its use after their first attempt. This fact, more than all the discussions in the current professional literature, indicates that web-based conferencing is here to stay.

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Autobiographical Sketches

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